

Aristotle on comedy

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It is difficult to give a full and confident account of Aristotle's views on comedy, since no extended treatment of the subject by him survives. It is probable that the extant *Poetics* is incomplete, and that comedy was discussed more fully in the original text. It has been argued (most notably by Richard Janko) that an epitome of the second book of the *Poetics* was the ancestor of a much later text known as the *Tractatus Coislinianus*. This thesis is highly controversial; even if it is correct, the complex process that reduced the tractate to its present form has severely obscured whatever Aristotelian doctrine it once contained, and few scholars would regard it as a reliable aid in reconstructing what Aristotle wrote. Our starting-point must therefore be the brief account in Chapter 5 of the *Poetics*, supplemented with what can be learned from other references scattered through the rest of Aristotle's extant works.

'Comedy is... an imitation of inferior people' (*Poet.* 1449a32f., cf. 1448a2-5, 16-18, 1448b24-6). 'Inferior' (*phaulos*) contrasts with the admirable (*spoudaios*) characters of tragedy (1448a1-4, 1449b24). The terms have both moral and social implications. The central figures of comedy include persons of low status (such as peasants and slaves) who are only peripheral in tragedy; and comic characters will tend to behave badly, even if they are of high status. Moral badness is acceptable in tragic characters if, and only to the extent that, the structure of the plot demands it (1454a28f.); but comedy deliberately incorporates moral badness in its characters, since comedy aims to evoke laughter and 'the laughable (*geloion*) is a species of what is disgraceful' (1449a33f.). Here, too, comedy is antithetical to tragedy. Tragedy aims to evoke pity and fear, which Aristotle defines as reactions to painful and destructive harm (*Rhet.* 1382a21f., 1385b13f.); hence tragedy involves suffering, which is 'an action that involves destruction or pain' (*Poet.* 1452b11f.). But comedy eschews suffering: 'the laughable is an error or disgrace that does not involve pain or destruction' (1449a34f.). Aristotle's immediate illustration is the comic mask, which is ugly and distorted, though not in pain (1449a36f.), and elsewhere distortions of language, as in word-play, are described as laughable (*SE* 182b15-22, *Rhet.* 1412a26-30); but deviations from the social and ethical norm would also be included. Thus, for example, Aristotle suggests that if the story of Orestes were burlesqued in a comedy, it would not end with Orestes killing Aegisthus but with their reconciliation (*Poet.* 1453a35-9); if Orestes failed to fulfil the obligation to avenge his father's murder, and indeed made friends with the murderer, that would be a laughable disgrace.

Aristotle believed that the division between comedy and tragedy in terms of the kinds of person imitated could be traced back to the very earliest stages of poetry's evolution. According to his sketch of a history of poetry in *Poetics* 4 (1448b20-49a6), poetry was already divided into two broad streams as it emerged from the primitive improvisations that were the earliest expressions of the natural human pleasure in imitation. The elementary forms of the two kinds of poetry were hymns and encomia, imitating morally and socially superior actions, and

invectives, imitating the actions of the morally and socially inferior. In the one tradition there was a progression from encomia to heroic epic as poetry acquired narrative form. Homer was important in this tradition, for two reasons. First, his narratives were based on unified plots, consisting of a single series of events connected to each other in accordance with necessity or probability (1451a16-35, 1459a17-59b2). Secondly, by allowing the characters to speak for themselves (1448a19-24, 1460a5-11) Homer anticipated the later emergence of drama. The earliest extant poem in the other tradition is the *Margites*, a burlesque epic sometimes attributed to Homer, of which only a few fragments now survive. Aristotle surmises that the *Margites* must have had many predecessors, now lost. This inference is presumably based on the highly developed features already observable in *Margites*: it was a narrative poem, not an invective, and shared the quasi-dramatic technique of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. These features were exceptional: the comment that 'some of the ancients became composers of heroic poetry, others of lampoons (*iamboi*)' (1448b34f.), reflects the fact that iambic poetry remained more common than narrative burlesque. This may explain why Aristotle accepted the attribution of *Margites* to Homer, who is thus seen as having played a crucial role in the development of both kinds of poetry (another sign of his remarkable genius, since 1448b25-7 correlates the two traditions with the character of the poets).

When Aristotle goes on to describe *Margites* as 'not an invective, but a dramatisation of the laughable' (1448b37f.), the contrast is between invective and drama. Some scholars hold that there is also an important contrast between invective and what is laughable, so that comedy differs from invective in content as well as in form. But in context, it is still Homer's use of quasi-dramatic form with which Aristotle is concerned. It is in this sense that in *Margites* Homer adumbrated comedy, so that *Margites* stands to comedy as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* do to tragedy (1448b38-49a2).

Although the Homeric poems adumbrated drama, comedy and tragedy proper developed later. Aristotle subsequently traces their origins from improvised choral performances—phallic songs in the case of comedy (1449a9-13). This separate origin obviously does not exclude the possibility that the pioneers of comedy and tragedy were influenced by Homer's adumbration of dramatic form; but Aristotle does not make this point explicitly. Once drama had emerged, poets in both traditions recognised its superiority to the older non-dramatic forms, and became comic and tragic dramatists by preference (1448a2-6).

The earliest stages of comedy (like the earliest stages of the broader tradition of poetry imitating inferior persons and their actions) are lost to view, because the genre was not taken as seriously as tragedy (1448b38-49b5). Aristotle is aware of several distinct local traditions of comedy—Megarian (1448a31f.) and Sicilian (1448a33-5, 1449b6f.), as well as Athenian (1449b7f.). He reports disputes between the traditions about priority without adjudication (1448a29-b2), but in one crucial respect he does concede priority to Sicilian comedy: 'plot-construction came originally from Sicily' (1449b6f.). Aristotle continues: 'among Athenian poets it was Crates who first abandoned the form of a lampoon and began to construct universalised stories and plots' (1449b7-9). It is not entirely clear

whether Aristotle is crediting Crates with having imported Sicilian-style plots into Athenian comedy, or having taken a step beyond the Sicilians in the sophistication of his plot-construction. But Aristotle knows of earlier comic poets in Athens (1448a34, Chionides and Magnes, later than the Sicilian Epicharmus), and unequivocally regards them as writers of comedy, not of invective or lampoon. So it seems likely that he thought that plot-construction had entered Athenian comedy under Sicilian influence before Crates, whose contribution was an improvement in the nature of comic plots.

The nature of Crates' innovation can be inferred from the fuller explanation of poetic universality in *Poetics* 9. Universality is achieved if what is said and done 'is consonant with a person of a given kind in accordance with probability or necessity' (1451b8-10), and if the events are connected with each other in accordance with necessity or probability (cf. 1451a12-14, 27f.; 1451b34f.; 1452a19-21; 1454a34-6). Comedy 'in the form of a lampoon' would presumably have had the kind of plot which Aristotle describes as 'episodic' (1451b34-6): a series of comic routines with no necessary or probable connection between them. In Crates' universalised plots the comic routines would be organised as a sequence of causally connected events.

Aristotle's discussion of poetic universality makes a contrast with historiography, which reports whatever a particular person did regardless of causal coherence. He notes that poetry's difference from historiography is especially clear from the practice of comic poets: 'They construct the plot on the basis of probabilities, and then supply names of their own choosing; they do not write about a particular individual, as the lampoonists do' (1451b12-15). This has been taken to imply that Crates' innovation also involved abandoning satirical portrayals of, and abuse directed against, real individuals. That may be true (and the fragments of Crates' work tend to support this); but if so, the connection with the development of more coherent plot-structure is a contingent one. Comedy's use of invented characters is a clear illustration of poetic universality, but not a necessary condition of it, as the contrasting practice of tragedy proves (1451b15-19, 29-32). So there is no reason to suppose that Aristotle thought that comedy ought to abstain from satirical portrayals of, or abuse directed against, real individuals.

In fact, Aristotle took it for granted that the language of comic poets would be slanderous, and also indecent (*Rhet.* 1384b9-11; *Pol.* 1336b13-23). In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1128a22-5) he notes a transition from the open indecency of older comedy to innuendo in more recent comedy, and comments on the greater propriety of the latter, and this has often been understood as expressing a preference for the more recent style of comedy. But 'correctness is not the same thing in ethics and poetry' (*Poet.* 1460b13f.). Aristotle's point in the *Ethics* is that the more recent style of comedy is a better guide to the standards of behaviour to be observed in everyday life. Nothing follows from this about his evaluation of the different styles of comedy as comedy. When poetry is in question, 'in evaluating any utterance or action one must take into account not just the moral qualities of what is actually done or said, but also the identity of the agent or speaker' (*Poet.* 1461a4-7). The fact that characters of Greek comedy (especially, but not

exclusively, Old Comedy in the style of Aristophanes) frequently abuse each other and real contemporaries, often obscenely, is one aspect of the moral badness of comic characters. If comedy is devoted to the imitation of inferior people, it cannot logically be maintained that its characters ought to conform to the ethical standards of everyday life in what they say and do.

The imitation of morally inferior characters does, however, raise a concern about the ethical effect on impressionable young people. There is a danger that those who have not already learned how to behave in ordinary social contexts may transfer indecent language and behaviour from comedy to everyday life. Aristotle is alert to this problem. But while he is willing to consider an extension of legal restraints on abuse and mockery in social life (*EN* 1128a30f.), this does not lead him to recommend any reform of, or restraint on, the content of comedy. In the *Politics* (1336b3-23) he exempts certain religious cults, along with iambus and comedy, from a proposed ban on indecency and abuse in contexts where the young will be exposed to it, since these activities take place in contexts to which access can be controlled. Young people whose moral character is still in the process of formation should be excluded from comedy; but adult males, whose moral education has rendered them immune to the potentially harmful moral effects, may attend (1336b20-23).

While Aristotle would not apply the ethical standards of everyday life to comedy, it does not follow that he thought that comedy was subject to no restraints at all. In principle, abuse and obscenity might be taken to a level excessive even for comedy. Unfortunately, we have no way of telling what level of abuse and obscenity Aristotle judged excessive in a comedy. A similar problem arises in the case of plot-structure. Even in the case of tragedy, Aristotle is willing to treat the requirement of necessary or probable connection with some flexibility (1454b6-8, 1460a26-b2; cf. 1460b23-6); in comedy there must be even greater scope for departing from necessary or probable connection, since discontinuities in the action may have a comic effect. (This does not make Crates' innovation pointless. Where there is nothing but disjointed comic routines, discontinuity has no comic effect; it is only in the context of a generally sustained impression of continuity that a violation of necessity or probability will seem incongruous and laughable.) But we have no way of telling how flexible Aristotle would have been in this regard.

Because Aristotle's judgement on the limits of comic license in all these respects is unknown, there is little objective basis for the widespread assumption that he must have disapproved of Aristophanic comedy. The fact that Aristophanes can be named alongside Homer and Sophocles (1448a25-8) might well be thought to imply a high valuation.

Further reading

M. Heath, 'Aristotelian comedy', *CQ* 39 (1989), 344-54

R. Janko, *Aristotle on Comedy. Towards a Reconstruction of Poetics II* (London 1984)

MALCOLM HEATH, 'ARISTOTLE ON COMEDY'

R. Janko, 'Aristotle on comedy, Aristophanes and some new evidence from Herculaneum', in Ø. Andersen & J. Haarberg (ed.), *Making Sense of Aristotle: Essays in Poetics* (London 2001), 51-71

L. Golden, 'Comic pleasure', *Hermes* 115 (1987), 165-74 (reprinted as 'Aristotle on the pleasure of comedy', in A.O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* (Princeton NJ 1992), 379-86)